

In panel discussion with Walden Bello

Historian Joseph Scalice exposes the role of Stalinism in the rise of Duterte

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On April 22, historian Joseph Scalice spoke as part of a panel on the rise of President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, in which he documented the role played by the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in facilitating Duterte's rise to power.

The panel, entitled *Determining Duterte: Imperialism, Neoliberalism, Stalinism*, was jointly hosted by Ateneo de Manila University and Portsmouth University. A video of the event has been uploaded. Dr. Scalice's presentation, "Embracing a Fascist: How the Communist Party of the Philippines Facilitated and Endorsed Duterte's Rise to Power," begins at 59 minutes into the panel.

As he has done in previous public lectures, Scalice demonstrated that the Communist Party of the Philippines, and the various organizations that follow its political line, provided a critical base of support for the fascist Duterte and made possible his rise to the presidency.

He pointed out that Duterte's politics have been of a murderous right-wing character for decades. Duterte was the head of death squads as mayor of the southern Philippine city of Davao long before rising to the Presidency in 2016.

Scalice summarized how the CPP, like Stalinist parties around the globe, instructed workers, youths, and peasants that the tasks of the revolution were not yet socialist but were national and democratic in character. A section of the capitalist class, the party argued, was therefore an ally in the revolutionary struggles of the working class. In service to this program of nationalism, the party formed alliances with elite politicians and oligarchic dynasties.

Scalice succinctly documented the support that the CPP provided to Duterte during his terms as mayor, during his presidential candidacy, and upon his taking office, including endorsement for his bloody war on drugs, that has killed over 30,000 people in the past five years. Scalice had developed these points more extensively in an earlier lecture.

Several new points emerged in this lecture. Scalice spoke of how ties between President Duterte and the CPP broke

down in 2017, not because the CPP or the "national democratic" organizations that share its political line opposed the president, but because the Philippine military sabotaged the relationship. The national democratic organizations, groups such as Bayan, staged protests demanding that the cabinet members of the Duterte administration selected by the CPP be allowed to remain in their positions.

Scalice showed photographs of a mass demonstration staged in mid-2017 at Duterte's second State of the Nation address that highlighted the continuing ties between the national democratic groups and the president. The death toll from the war on drugs was nearing ten thousand. In a public display of uncertainty and ambivalence, still holding out hope that the relations with Duterte could be restored, Bayan produced a two-sided effigy of Duterte. On one side, he was depicted as a radical, his hand raised in a militant salute; on the obverse, he had a Hitler mustache and his raised fist had been transformed into a fascist salute. Scalice remarked, "This was their expression of public ambivalence: he might be a revolutionary, he might be Hitler. We're not sure. Let's pressure him and see what comes about."

Other elements of the panel discussion were instructive. Dr. Tom Sykes, of the University of Portsmouth, the fourth speaker, spoke of the hypocrisy of US imperialism and the mainstream media in their selective outrage at human rights violations by figures like Duterte while never dealing with the war crimes of Washington. He similarly dealt with accusations being raised against supposed "Chinese imperialism" in the region, when the single greatest destabilizing military presence was that of the United States.

What was most significant in the panel was the interaction between the second speaker, Walden Bello, and Scalice. Prof. Bello, currently affiliated with the University of the Philippines, has a prominent international reputation as a figure of the left and an opponent of globalization, a subject on which he has authored a number of books.

Bello was a key figure in the 1970s and early 1980s in the international and fundraising work of the CPP. In the aftermath of the People Power overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos, a number of individuals, including Bello, broke with the CPP in the late 1980s and early 1990s and joined with a collection of Social Democrats to found a new organization, Akbayan, that promptly threw itself into parliamentary politics.

While presenting itself as “left,” Akbayan was founded on the same basic political orientation as the CPP: nationalism and an alliance with a section of the capitalist class. In 2009, Akbayan formed an alliance with the Liberal Party and Benigno Aquino III, who was elected president in 2010. Bello was elected to congress. For five years he was Akbayan’s representative in the legislature and was responsible for support for the Aquino administration. In this capacity, he helped the Aquino government sharpen tensions with China over the South China Sea. In March 2015, he belatedly resigned from Akbayan, citing its too close relations with the president. He became national chair of a new left umbrella group, Laban ng Masa (Fight of the Masses), which brings together a range of organizations, including Partido Lakas ng Masa and Sanlakas, that emerged out of the break-up of the CPP in the early 1990s.

Dr. Bello pointed out that the base of enthusiastic support for Duterte rested with the “elite and the middle class,” and not with the poor and workers. He outlined how the repeated failures of each of the administrations after the ouster of Marcos to bring about even a modest improvement in the standard of living for the majority of the population, who continue to live under conditions of poverty and extreme inequality, made possible the rise of right-wing populism. Repeated disillusionment, he stated, with these earlier administrations gave credibility to the populism of Duterte.

Scalice responded to Bello on this point. Why were there illusions in these administrations to begin with? The illusions had been systematically cultivated by the politics of Stalinism, Scalice argued. The CPP and the national democratic organizations had provided enthusiastic support to a number of these figures, in the same manner that they did Duterte. Akbayan played the same role in its backing of the Liberal Party.

Scalice further pointed out that it was, in fact, the Liberal Party of Aquino that brought Duterte onto the national stage in the years before he ran for president. Duterte was a member of the Liberal Party and regularly consulted with Aquino from 2009 to 2015. “It must be said, Prof. Bello,” Scalice remarked, “that this occurred while you were the representative of Akbayan and Akbayan was in an alliance with the Liberal Party.”

Bello responded to Scalice, explaining that Akbayan had

played this role because their conception had been to “push from the left in order to gain the progressive reforms that would be possible at that point as well as move the Philippines to a more independent position in foreign policy.” He admitted, however, “that did not in fact succeed.”

Scalice concluded his talk by calling for the political independence of the working class. He pointed to the newly formed opposition coalition, 1Sambayan, which is a gathering together of traditional politicians and opponents of Duterte together with various Stalinist organizations and representatives of the far-right. The unifying principle of this organization is not hostility to authoritarianism or the defense of democracy—many of the potential candidates of 1Sambayan have recent ties to Duterte and his war on drugs—but rather a desire to reorient Philippine foreign policy away from China and toward the United States.

1Sambayan, Scalice stated, has received the support of all of the forces of the “left” in the Philippines, including Bayan, Partido ng Manggagawa, and Laban ng Masa, “of which, Prof. Bello, you are the national chair.”

Bello responded that Laban ng Masa is not part of 1Sambayan, “We have definitely been quite critical of the way that 1Sambayan has been formed.” Scalice pointed out, however, that while Laban ng Masa was not a founding member of 1Sambayan, it had termed the formation of 1Sambayan “a breath of fresh air.” He noted that Bello had written a statement calling for 1Sambayan to hold primaries that would allow it to arrive at a “Biden-like candidate.”

“I don’t see that as a way forward at all,” Scalice stated, “And my call for the independence of the working class is antithetical to such a conception.”



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